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M. Speaker,

On January 10, President Bush announced an escalation of the Iraq war that will put as many as 50,000 more of our men and women in harm's way. This body owes them an explanation for why, at this moment in history, their sacrifice is justified.

Democrats and Republicans alike are determined to defend our nation from harm and are wholly committed to supporting and protecting the members of our armed forces.

But numerous military officials of the highest ranks - individuals like General Colin Powell and General John Abizaid - have expressed their strong belief that increasing the number of combat troops in Iraq won't improve the situation in that country.

Two-thirds of the American people think further escalating the war is the wrong path to follow. Even respected Republican Members of the Senate and the House have been quick to state publicly that they oppose any troop surge.

Republican Representative Steve LaTourette best explained this broad, bi-partisan opposition to the President's plan: "Like many Americans," he recently said, "I desperately want America to succeed in Iraq and I would welcome a fresh approach...This isn't a fresh approach. This is more of the same."

For four years, through the deaths of 3,126 American soldiers and nearly 60 thousand Iraqi civilians, through the forced dislocation of millions of Iraqi families, through numerous troop escalations and 379 billion dollars appropriated by this Congress, through unbearable strains stretching our national guard and army reserve, their members, and their families to the breaking point, more of the same hasn't worked.

As of last June, only 25 percent of Iraqis had clean water to drink. Oil production has fallen by nearly half since the war began. The unemployment rate in Iraq as of December ranged between 25 percent and 40 percent.

67 more innocent civilians were killed yesterday in yet another bombing. 84 of our troops were killed last month. 41 have been killed in the last two weeks alone. My district has suffered 6 casualties since 2005 - and 140 men and women from my state of New York have been killed so far in Iraq.

Every piece of evidence suggests that the strategy currently employed by this Administration is failing in Iraq.

The only argument that can be used to support an escalation of the war is one of trust. If we just give the President one more chance, we are told, things will be different.

M. Speaker, I believe that the American people, the military leaders who know what war really is, and a broad majority of this Congress are tired of giving the Administration one more chance - and tired of giving it our trust.

The Pentagon's Inspector General recently reported that statements made by former Undersecretary of Defense Douglas J. Feith during the run-up to war were, quote, "inconsistent with the consensus of the Intelligence Community" and drew "conclusions that were not fully supported by the available intelligence."

So why should we trust the Administration's assessments of Iraq?

And why should we trust the President to give the new troops he wants to send the protection they need to make it back home unharmed?

Despite all of the President's rhetoric in support of our Armed Forces, a second Pentagon report released at the end of January bluntly states that for years in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I quote, "Service members...experienced shortages of

force-protection equipment," and were "not always equipped to effectively complete their missions."

The same is true today. The Washington Post noted just yesterday that many Humvees still don't have the armor needed to protect them from the bombs that are killing and injuring 70 percent of our troops abroad.

While our troops have gone unprotected, corruption, exploitation, and incompetence have squandered billions of dollars, and allowed vital reconstruction projects to be handed to well-connected companies that failed to fulfill their duties. Despite it all, for years, this Administration treated accountability as if it were a dirty word.

Why should we expect that without a radical change of course, things will suddenly improve?

M. Speaker, changing a broken course in Iraq will not demoralize our troops or abandon them. To the contrary, it is the only way of truly supporting the troops.

Changing a broken course in Iraq will not provide our enemies with encouragement, either. If our strategy is not working, then why would we help our enemies by resolutely adhering to a failing plan?

Democrats are insisting on a new level of accountability here in Congress, calling 52 hearings since January 4th.

But we also need a new course in Iraq. We need to oppose this escalation and this stubborn adherence to a failing strategy.

We need to shift our focus and footprint in the region, and to accept what so many observers have known for years: the conflict in Iraq will only be solved politically, not militarily.

As strongly as I feel on this matter, M. Speaker, I recognize that many of my colleagues in the House have a different perspective.

What is needed is a serious discussion conducted by serious people. The first step of such a discussion is a focused, clear, and full debate on the question of the escalation itself. We need an unambiguous up-or-down vote on the escalation. We are keeping this Rule, and this bill, so straightforward in order to best produce that result.

I want to emphasize that Congress will have many opportunities, during discussions of supplemental funding requests, for example, to debate the numerous dimensions of this war and to present new ways forward.

But we must first know where we stand. Our goal this week is to establish whether Congress agrees or disagrees with the President's current approach to Iraq. If the answer is no, then we will have the basis for forcing the President to work in a bi-partisan way with us to change that approach.

The obvious truth is that a failure to achieve such a change will seal the fate of this war as one of the greatest blunders in American history.

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